

## **Los Alamos Volunteer Task Force**

***John Hogan, USGS Jemez Mountains Field Station***

***Craig Martin, Volunteer Coordinator***

A Volunteer Task Force (VTF) was established to help the community of Los Alamos, New Mexico deal with the aftermath of the Cerro Grande fire. Homes of thirty percent of the students at the Los Alamos Mountain Elementary School were lost in the Cerro Grande Fire. Initially the VTF adopted a county nature trail to help the sixth grade students cope with the effects of the fire. The VTF is a non-profit organization dedicated to sound ecological stewardship and cross-cultural relationships by providing opportunities for service learning and hands-on outdoor education. It emphasizes forest health, fire ecology and post fire recovery through citizen based science.

Since May 2000, the VTF has logged more than 40,619 volunteer hours involving more than 2,600 volunteers. Science is relevant to the lives of many residents of Los Alamos due to the proximity of Los Alamos Nuclear Laboratory and the many employees that make their homes in the community. The projects that involved these families are serious real science. One of the VTF projects conducted by schoolchildren included collecting the first seedling survival data for the U.S. Forest Service. Fire ecology is the cornerstone of the VTF projects and with grant money provided through the Clean Water Act, work is ongoing for watershed rehabilitation in riparian areas and intermittent mountain streams.

People became a part of the VTF for many reasons including

- the healing process.
- restoration of the mountain that they viewed from their homes.
- to contribute a positive action after such a negative event.
- to thank firefighters.
- to prevent monsoon rains from eroding the fire area and washing a wall of mud onto the town.

Volunteers worked within the boundary of the Burned Area Emergency Rehabilitation (BAER), an area usually off limits to the public. A multi-agency community task force comprised of Los Alamos County, the U.S. Forest Service, the National Park Service, and Los Alamos National Laboratory was coordinated under the Incident Management System and began remediation. Buses carried more than 500 volunteers a day many of which were entire families. They mulched 1,200 acres before the monsoon season. By the end of the first year they had contributed 23,500 hours, mulched nearly 600 acres and filled and placed 66,000 sandbags.

In the second year they continued reforestation efforts by planting trees. The 1,500 volunteers planted 12,000 trees on 200 acres of the watershed. They rebuilt trails that had washed away and even designed and built a new trail that loops around the foothills above the town. After the second year, they elevated their efforts to teach fire education to the sixth grade classes at Mountain Elementary School. The trail rebuilding effort evolved into science and monitoring projects. They have conducted seedling survival studies, helped restore stream channels, planted trees and have put together a seed ball program for fourth graders. The school has instituted a field day once a week where students collect post-fire data

There is a great focus on stewardship. The kids learned that the restoration they participated in will not have an immediate return. They are learning they will have to take care of the restored areas until they are grown, but that their children will be able to enjoy the fruits of their labor. The students have gotten to work with interesting tools ranging from shovels and tree planters to GPS units and microscopes. There is a multidisciplinary approach that involves photography and fine arts, poetry and language arts, journal exercises and social studies. Another successful element of the project is that it gets the students out into nature where many have never been before. It has helped take the fear out of nature and fire.

The goal is to continue to evolve the curriculum-based education component so that it works its way up through the middle and high schools eventually becoming a part of the local university extension. The goal for the VTF is to continue helping their community and any other community impacted by wildfire to heal, restore and improve their fire-damaged community.